

Greyscale by littleboxesofstars

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Summary:

Soulmates are what make the world vibrant, colors getting brighter and brighter the closer a pair of souls get to one another. In usual cases, the world starts off black and white and changes as a person travels, but for Mike, colors have always been there. Faint, but there, and that doesn't change until the night his friend Will goes missing.

Greyscale

Author's Note:

My sister and I were talking about the bond El and Mike managed to form over just a couple of days and she was like "they're soulmates obv's" and I went !!!!!!! bc I love soulmate aus more than I love life itself. This takes place throughout the entirety of season 1! A majority of the dialogue is taken from the show, but there have been a few small changes made to the canon to fit better within the story. also posted to my tumblr @trash-the-tozier

Mike's world was always dull. Not by his friends, or his experiences; that's what made it all worthwhile. It was way the world looked. Everything was almost in greyscale, the colors just barely there, so nearly faded out that Mike had to concentrate to clearly see the saturation. If that was just the way it was, he wouldn't complain; he wouldn't know he could. But things looked muted. They felt muted. With fairy tales boasting worlds full of incredible sights, Mike couldn't help but feel frustrated. He supposed this was how it was for everyone though. That's just how the world was, is, and will be.

Except it isn't, as he comes to learn in kindergarten. They have a day learning about colors, the teacher bringing a color chart down from the wall and placing it next to her chair. They sit on the floor around her, looking up.

Each color is in its own row, ranging from incredibly dark to pale light as it travels horizontally across the poster. Mike reads each of the names, stopping at "orange" and "purple", having to sound them out slowly, like he's been taught to do when he encounters any other word he doesn't quite know yet.

"This is a color chart." Mrs. Anderson explains. "Each color is different, and they make up what the world looks like."

Mike nods in agreement. While it's a little hard to see, he can tell that "red" has this warmth to it that "blue" just doesn't have. Even at their

darkest points, there's something inherently brighter about "yellow" than "purple".

A boy sitting next to Mike named Lucas raises his hand. He's frowning, his eyes still on the chart as he speaks.

"They're not different." He says. "They look the same."

Mrs. Anderson gives him a gentle smile.

"They look that way now. One day though, when you meet someone special, colors will show up. It's like that Hot and Cold game. Have any of you played that one? When you're trying to find something, and the closer you get, the 'hotter' you get, and the further away, the 'colder' you are? It's like that. The closer you are to your special person, the better and brighter colors will be. Life will take all of you to many different places, so a lot of you are too far away from your soulmate to see colors yet. But don't worry about it. Colors will happen with time."

Then it's Mike's turn to frown, his friend Will catching his eye and looking concerned by his expression. Mike doesn't understand. He can already see colors, even if it's just barely. Does that mean his soulmate is nearby? It has to, right?

He asks his mother about it that night as she tucks him into bed, confiding in her that he can already see colors a little bit, and that he isn't like the other kids in his class. She gives him a strange expression, a smile that he doesn't realize until years later is a little bit happy and a little bit sad.

"That is fantastic, Michael." She brushes his bangs back from his forehead, tucking some of his hair behind his ear. "She must live around here! In this state, or in this town, maybe."

Mike doesn't really get it. Sometimes, he would rather be normal, like the other colorblind kids in his class. Does it have to be a girl? They're all annoying and giggly, and Will says Jonathan told him they all have cooties. Mike doesn't know what cooties are, but he doesn't want any.

Dustin is fun and talkative, and when he joins their group in third grade, the rest of them become more talkative too. Mike ends up confessing about his color vision at a sleepover the following year (he blames it being late for making his tongue loose, despite it only being three minutes after midnight; that's late when you're nine years old) and despite trying to emphasize how faint the colors are, all of his friends bombard him with questions. They spend a few weekends riding around town to see if the color gets stronger or weaker, but if it does change it's not enough for Mike to notice. He likes that his friends know, though.

In fifth grade, Lucas starts asking him if his clothes match. Mike doesn't really know what he's talking about--"fashion, you know? looking good?"--and thinks it's kind of stupid, but he still tries to help. He's usually just nodding or shaking his head at random because it's all still mostly grey anyway, feeling a bit bad sometimes when he realizes how much Lucas is taking his criticisms to heart. Will usually has a quiet question or two about soulmates, but Mike usually can't answer them. He may be seeing colors, but he's as clueless as everyone else.

He begins unknowingly taking comfort in the incredibly greywashed hues he can see, and as a result begins hating it when his family goes on trips out of state, or even out of town. He doesn't like it when the brown fades from Nancy's hair, or he can't see the blue in the eyes of his new baby sister, Holly. The limitation of his vision fills him with unease, even his dreams playing out completely in black and white, and he hopes for the sake of his soulmate that they don't feel as unsettled as he does when the distance grows between them and the colors fade away. He just hopes they know he'll return.

His first year of middle school is the first time the colors disappear. He's in the middle of class when everything snaps to black and white, and it's so sudden that he nearly falls out of his chair. He has to leave, getting shakily to his feet and running from the room, ignoring his teacher's angry voice yelling after him, and a concerned Dustin calling his name. His legs feel shaky and he doesn't even get all the way down the hallway, bumping hard into the wall of lockers with his shoulder and stumbling in an attempt to steady himself.

The disappearance wasn't gradual, as though his soulmate was

moving farther away from him. It was instant, quick as a blink, and now Mike feels as though he's gone blind. He knows that colors don't disappear when soulmates fall asleep, so consciousness isn't the problem. It's more permanent than that. Farther away. It's as though his soulmate is dead.

The whole world sways and Mike feels himself sinking to the floor. Almost as soon as the thought hits him though, the colors are back, still dull, still as washed out as always but *there* , and Mike takes in a shaky breath.

"Mike!" Will's voice, calling his name, pulling him from his haze of hopeless confusion as his friends run down the hallway. They all crouch next to him, Lucas putting a hand on his shoulder.

"Are you okay? Are you going to throw up? You look like you're going to throw up."

"What's--" He looks around at them all, trying to reclaim his breathing. "What are you guys doing?"

"Worried about you." Will explains briefly. He catches Mike's eyes and holds them, and Mike knows he can tell how shaken he is. "What happened?"

"I... I was just sitting there, in class, and then all color disappeared. Like my soulmate was just gone. I thought maybe my soulmate died, or... Or something."

Dustin lets out a low whistle.

"Oh man."

"But it's back now. Colors, I mean. I don't know what happened."

He looks at them all, hoping for a solution, but a few clueless shrugs follow his eyes. Then their teacher sticks her head out into the hallway. She looks incredibly peeved.

"Oh, yeah." Dustin gives Mike a sheepish grin. "She wouldn't buy into the idea that all three of us needed to pee at the same time, but we ran out anyway. So we all have detention this afternoon for 'making a

scene' to help you." He gets up, pulling Mike to his feet too, and despite himself Mike feels a small smile on his face.

Detention gives them time to think of theories, swapping them as they walk home together. Some of them are otherworldly or extraterrestrial--"no, his soulmate isn't an alien, shut up Dustin"--and by the end of it Lucas's idea is the most plausible, as much as Mike hates it.

"Maybe she's sick. Maybe she flatlined, but the doctors used those electric shock things to bring her back."

"Defibrillators?" Mike asks uncomfortably, the word long and clumsy on his tongue. He doesn't like the sound of that. He doesn't want his soulmate to be that sick; it sounds horrible. He can only hope it's a one time thing.

It's not. It takes nearly a year for it to happen again, but then it begins increasing in frequency. By the fall next school year, this "flatlining" is happening once or twice a week, and it terrifies Mike every single time. He always holds his breath, and if colors haven't come back by the time his lungs begin to burn, he starts feeling panicky. But the flatlining begins lasting longer and longer, and when a fifteen minutes one passes during lunch on Friday, Mike fears his soulmate might be gone forever. He hadn't realized how much he cared about having a soulmate until the threat of losing them came.

Three days later, Will Byers is declared missing. He rode out from Mike's after a D&D session and never came back. His bike is found, but he's not on it. He's nowhere to be seen. It's all surreal, Mike feeling as though he's not even in his body when he hears the news, strangely terrified and disconnected. It's almost unbelievable. The police question Dustin, Lucas, and Mike himself, but Mike feels like their answers don't help much.

The colors before Mike's eyes are noticeably brighter, fluctuating as he goes throughout his Monday, but he barely notices it. He's too worried; too distracted, though he does wonder if the two events are somehow connected. But the colors aren't disappearing, and either way there isn't anything Mike can do about it, so he focuses all of his energy instead on helping Will, to somehow find his best friend. He

completely disregards both his mother's curfew and the police chief's orders and gathers up Lucas and Dustin, heading out into the night.

It probably isn't the best idea to go out into the woods in the dark, in the rain, alone--walking through the same spanse of ground that Will was last seen, as Dustin has anxiously reminded them five times now--but Mike knows it'll be worth it if they can manage to find anything helpful. He's squinting through the heavy raindrops and the flashlight beam can only go so far, Mike and his friends stumbling over roots and stray branches as they make their way through the forest. They try a few times to call out Will's name but it feels useless, their voices swallowed up by the trees overhead and the whistling storm.

Then Mike hears something. It's faint but it's there and he tells his friends to shut up, standing stock still. It's the sound of a figure approaching, a jump in Mike's chest when he realizes the figure is small like Will, thin and shivering. Then he turns and points his light at the silhouette, and his breath dies in his throat.

It isn't Will. It's a girl, small and shaking slightly, soaked to the bone in what looks like nothing but a giant t-shirt. The shirt is so yellow that it has Mike stumbling back a few paces in shock, looking over the rest of her. She's pale from cold, her lips pink, the end of her nose bright red, her hair incredibly short and her eyes a dark brown. She's the most colorful thing Mike has ever seen, as though she's the center of the universe, the crystal that all light passes through to fracture into pieces and color the world.

She's looking at him in the same surprise that Mike's sure is on his face, Lucas leaning close and whispering harshly into his ear.

"What the hell do we do now?"

"W-we have to help her." It takes a moment for Mike to find his voice. "She's wet, and, and she's cold, and it's raining, we need to--" He reaches out to put a hand on her shoulder but she flinches back, and he freezes completely. "She needs help."

His friends' faces obviously don't agree, but they seem afraid to openly seem rude in front of another person, and don't say a word as

Mike turns back out of the woods to their bikes. The girl is silent as well but she follows very closely behind him, just a step or two away. Dustin and Lucas don't talk to him either, though Mike does overhear Lucas asking what the hell it is Mike is thinking. Honestly, Mike isn't sure. All he knows is that he can't leave her alone in the rain like this.

They make it back to his house, entering the basement unnoticed, and as soon as Mike walks into the downstairs room he's immediately assaulted with a wash of colors, browns and reds and greens and oranges all over the place in a mismatched hodgepodge.

Dustin bumps his shoulder to get past him, jostling him out of his surprise and back into action. The girl is still shivering, looking around the room with wide eyes, and Mike grabs a big tan coat laying across the couch, offering it in her direction. She just stares so he begins draping it gingerly over her shoulders and then she understands, pulling it quickly around herself. He gestures to the couch and she sits without question, the action more of a collapse than anything, and Mike feels worried for her. He looks over her again and sees that despite the reservation on her face she's clearly exhausted, her eyes downcast.

He asks the first logical thing he can think of.

"Is there a number we can call? For your parents?"

She looks up at him and Mike swallows. Her eyes are big and dark, the same color as the buzzed-short hair on her head. Of course, that's what Dustin asks about. He first asks what happened to it, then if she has cancer, and Mike is brought back to Lucas's "flatlining" theory instantly, asking the girl if she's in trouble. Then Lucas says something about blood, reaching towards her with a pointer finger. Remembering the way she flinched back when he tried to touch her earlier, Mike bats his hand away. They've all battered her with questions but she's barely moved, just sitting there, wide eyed.

"Stop it! You're freaking her out." He tells Lucas. Lucas gapes at him.

"She's freaking me out!" He insists. After a bit more arguing and a rather offensive deafness test, Mike realizes that the girl is still in her soaking wet clothes. He rushes to get something for her, a pair of

sweats that he hopes will keep her warm. She nearly takes her clothes off in front of them and Dustin completely flies off the handle, Mike realizing by the look on her face that she's doesn't know what's wrong. Somehow, she doesn't know that girls and boys aren't supposed to just change clothes in front of each other. It worries him a little bit, but he takes her quickly to the bathroom and tries to close the door.

"No." Her voice is soft, but insistent all the same.

"Oh, so you can speak!" The words sound dumb as soon as they leave his mouth, but he can't help it. He's too surprised. He'd nearly just assumed she couldn't talk at all, but he's glad she can. Her voice is nice, he thinks, but once he realizes the thought he shakes it away. He leaves the door open a crack and returns to his friends, where Dustin still hasn't put his head back on his shoulders and Lucas is nervous about the whole thing.

Lucas's claims about an escaped convict and the looney bin make Mike upset for reasons he can't really describe. When he reveals his plan to let the girl spend the night in his basement both of his friends turn on him in disbelief, but he doesn't think it's that crazy. Kicking her out into the rain isn't even an option in his mind, and their parents would get mad at them if they tried to do anything about her tonight. So she has to sleep here.

Lucas and Dustin go home, and he sets up a little hideaway for the girl to sleep in, getting her any pillows or blankets he thinks she could want. Thankfully, he finds that his clothes aren't too big on her, and she curls up in her alcove. She's quiet and wary, flinching back when Mike reaches for her, and he berates himself when he draws his hand back. He should have remembered that touch makes her uncomfortable. But he just can't help it; she pulled back her sleeve when he asked her for her name, and there's something etched into her arm.

"I've never seen a kid with a tattoo before." He explains in apology. The ink on the inside of her forearm doesn't form letters, but three numbers instead. 011. Eleven. "What's it mean, eleven?"

She meets his eyes, tapping her chest with a pointer finger, the action

deliberate.

"That's your name?" He asks, confused. People aren't named after numbers. Or, they shouldn't be. But she nods.

"Oh, okay. Well, my name's Mike, short for Michael. Maybe we can call you El, short for Eleven?"

She gives a small, consenting nod. El. It feels strange, like he just named her, but it's not as though she's a stray dog. She's a person, a girl, and she's spending the night in her basement. His friends' disbelief of his plan hits him then, just a little bit.

It's horrifically past bedtime, and though Mike still feels wide awake, the girl--El, he reminds himself--probably needs to sleep. Whatever she's been through, it's taken a lot out of her. Mike gets to his feet.

"Night El."

"Night, Mike."

Her voice again, soft but steady, and when he hears her say his name, something about the world shifts. It's as though something that was off is finally amended, and he feels it as his heart clicks into place inside his chest. Everything feels *right*.

It takes until he's laying in bed and staring at the ceiling to realize why. Because the world is completely in color now. Because she's his soulmate. This is what having a soulmate feels like. Mike hugs his arms around himself, the feeling strangely comforting, and lets his eyes close.

The next day, El refuses to talk to Mike's mom. She flat out says no and doesn't get up, and Mike doesn't know what to do. Eleven doesn't want help. She's lost, homeless, with nothing to her name--a name that's a number, no less--and she doesn't want help. There's only one explanation Mike can think of, and it makes his limbs feel weak.

"You're in trouble, aren't you?"

It's barely a question, and she doesn't answer, just glancing up at him, but Mike knows he's right.

"Who... Who are you in trouble with?"

He hopes it's something small. She's in trouble with her parents, maybe. Mike knew a kid in third grade that got taken from his parents and moved out of state after a couple months of not being able to bring a lunch to school. The other kids didn't like him because it didn't seem like he wasn't able to wash his clothes very often either, and sometimes he had bruises on his arms, but Mike and Will would sit with him and share their lunches. Then he moved away to live with his aunt. Eleven is demolishing the Eggos he'd brought downstairs for her so quickly that it reminds Mike of that boy, and he hopes maybe that was it. Just that. But then she speaks, and his hopes are dashed.

"Bad." Her voice is grave, barely a whisper.

"Bad? Bad people?"

He wants to help her. He wants to help her so much that his chest aches in a way he's never felt before, but first he needs to know what's wrong. She nods.

"They want to hurt you? The bad people?"

She shapes her fingers into a gun, pointing at her own temple, and Mike feels his stomach twist. Then, unblinkingly, she shifts the barrel of her gun to Mike's face instead, her fingers mere inches from his face, pointed straight for his throat. She meets his eyes.

"Understand?" She asks him, and he does. They can't tell his mom about her. They can't tell anyone, because the bad people want to hurt Eleven, and if they find out she's here, they'll hurt him too. They'll hurt everyone. Mike needs to keep her safe.

His mother calls for him, and it's time to go to school. He rides his bike about a third of the way there, watching colors fade slightly before he doubles back, skipping class to stay at home with El. Everyone has gone out so he lets her leave the basement, showing her

his house and his things. He knows that she's only half paying attention to him as he talks about the stuff he's pointing to, but that's because she's trying to focus on everything around her at once as she looks around.

It's a bit strange to him, how fascinated and vaguely worried she is by everything, everything familiar that Mike calls home. It makes him wonder if she's ever had a "home" before. It seems impossible for her not to have, and he knows she couldn't have simply wandered around the woods her whole life, but still. He wants to know what happened to her, but he knows better than to ask.

It's strange for him too, though. He'd tried to keep it off his face that morning, teasing his sister as he wolfed down his food. He couldn't let anyone know he can see colors now, because his parents would have questions. But his house is so incredibly colorful. The furniture, the walls, the floors, and the trinkets that line the shelves are all little pops of color, instead of being so dull, and it isn't until now that Mike understands what Lucas meant about 'looking good'. The colors around his house are a mess, and he briefly wonders why nothing matches. But then El walks up to his father's La-Z-Boy, the thing muted despite his newfound color vision, and Mike hurries over excitedly, wanting to show it to her.

El likes his father's chair. It makes her smile when he reclines it and pops out the foot rest, nervous at first but nodding trustingly, the concerned expression melting into a smile when the chair rocks, and he has to smile back at her. *Cute*, he realizes, and this time he doesn't let himself shake the thought away. Her hair is nearly completely buzzed off, and her teeth are a little crooked in the front, and she's cute.

Mike has found a few people cute before. Holly could be cute, when she was sleeping or not screaming or something, but this is different. This is cute the way Alice from Science class was cute when she wore her hair in a bow for picture day, or the way Will is cute sometimes when he gets excited and smiles and jumps up and down. It's the kind of cute that makes Mike want to hold her close, keep her around and keep her safe. The different, good kind of cute. He likes that she makes him feel that way.

They're in his room, looking over his science fair trophies when she points to Will. It makes him a bit sick to his stomach to see the shocked, scared expression on her face when her finger touches the photograph.

"You know Will?" He asks. Maybe she saw him out, the night they'd gone to look for him and they'd found her instead. He tries to press her for answers, for anything, but they both whirl around when a car crunches into the driveway. His mom is home. El needs to hide.

The downstairs instantly loses itself as a viable option, so he drags her back into his room and begs her to hide in the closet. She's hesitant, and he promises not to tell his mom about her.

"Promise?" She asks in confusion.

"A promise is something you can't break." He explains. "Ever."

He isn't sure she understands but they're out of time, and thankfully she lets him hide her. He lies easily to his mother, who believes him to be too distraught to go to school, convincing her even after there's a loud bump from upstairs.

The sound has Mike confused, but that's nothing compared to how he feels when he goes upstairs and finds her on the floor, tears on her cheeks. She's upset and he doesn't know what to do, unsure of how anything could have happened in the time that he was gone, and he doesn't believe her when she says she's okay. He doesn't believe her even when she promises, but she gets to her feet, and doesn't elaborate. He doesn't hug her despite wanting to, knowing she probably wouldn't appreciate it. It makes his chest hurt, that same kind of hurt he felt when he found out she was in danger.

He didn't expect such a strong reaction from himself either, watching her curl up into a sitting position on his bed. He's a little scared by the pain on her face, feeling a surge of anger at whatever could have caused it. He shouldn't have left her alone, he thinks. She can't go back to the basement so they spend time in his room, Mike talking to her quietly, walking around his bedroom and exclaiming over all of the different colors of all of his things that he's never really noticed before.

"These colors are here because of you." He tells her. "You can see them too?"

She nods.

"Colors." She says, and Mike's heart swells, making a promise to himself then and there that despite what may have happened to her before she was found, he would never let her get hurt again.

Lucas and Dustin come over and meet her all over again, with her name this time. Mike tries to explain the situation about El's knowledge of Will and the Bad People but Dustin is too baffled to listen and Lucas is scared, so scared that he doesn't listen either. He tries to leave but Eleven doesn't let him, slamming and locking the door. Slamming and locking the door with her mind, that is, and Mike is amazed. He can't do anything but stand and stare, blood running slowly down her nose, deep and red. It's the darkest color Mike has ever seen.

They talk about her powers, and about Will, and teach El the word "friend". Dustin thinks she's really cool and Lucas doesn't trust her, and they decide to go out again the next day and look for Will after school, but with El this time to see if she can help.

But they have to go to school first. At recess Lucas teases Mike about El, laughing and saying he's in love with her, and while he's just joking, Mike feels conflicted. He doesn't know if he loves her or not. He feels as though he should, since they're soulmates and all, but love is such a big word. He knows there's something special about her, but isn't sure of much else. Either way, he doesn't tell his friends that she's his soulmate. It but feels too weird and embarrassing to let them know, and he genuinely doesn't know that he could get the words out if he tried, simply telling Lucas to shut up. Maybe he'll tell them when he figures it out and maybe he won't, but they're his best friends, so he knows that sooner or later they'll find out somehow.

Despite his promise to himself just the day before to keep Eleven from getting hurt, she gets hurt anyway. By him, no less, as Will's body is dragged from the water at the quarry. All of the false hope El had given him, about knowing Will and being able to find him is withering and dying before his eyes, and his chest hurts so badly and

his eyes sting and Mike whirls on her, in too much pain to see her own surprise and confusion and try to understand what that must mean. And he yells. He yells at her, because everything hurts too much and he doesn't understand how she could do this to him. Because Will's dead. He gets on his bike and goes home, the vibrancy of the world fading around him as he makes it back, letting his bike clatter on its side in the driveway and running straight into his mother's arms.

He's still crying when Eleven comes home. He's on the couch in the basement, holding a pillow to his chest, his sobs having subsided to a slow stream of tears down his cheeks that are beginning to seem constant. Colors start coming back to him slowly and he knows that means she's on her way, closing his eyes and pressing his face into the pillow, unsure of how he's going to feel upon seeing her again. He opens his eyes just in time to see the room awash with colors, and then she slips quietly through the door. She's visibly upset, shaken and shivering and sitting down in her alcove.

"How did you find your way back?" He asks quietly. Despite it all, he feels bad.

"Colors." Her voice is quiet and a little raspy, as though she's been crying too. They sit in silence, Mike able to feel it every time she looks over at him. He wonders what she's doing, or if she wants to say something, but she doesn't try, so he doesn't ask. He gets up, pulling out a binder he's kept of things Will has drawn for him, looking through, seeing the pictures fully in color for the first time. Will's colorblindness is evident, human characters having purple skin, or shooting green fireballs. Somehow though, Mike likes the pictures better this way.

Eleven gets up too. She takes his supercom, fiddling with it, the sound annoying and distracting. He tells her to stop but she doesn't seem to care, and it makes him angry all over again. He wants to explain himself but his words come out harshly, getting worked up and losing his message halfway through. Her eyes are wide and pained as she listens and a small part of Mike is almost glad of that, so full of hurt that he desperately wants to pawn those bad feelings off on another person. He turns back to the drawings, but then the supercom clicks again and Mike hears a voice. Will's voice.

Eleven's nose is bleeding, the same as it did when she used her powers before, and Mike realizes that she wasn't lying. She'd never lied to him. Will was still alive, but they couldn't see him. They couldn't reach him. He could only be reached by magic, by whatever it was El was doing to the radio. And she needed a bigger radio.

They realize that for that, she needs to go to their school, and for her to even leave the basement she needs to look like a normal girl. They take Nancy's stuff, old stuff that Mike is pretty sure she won't miss, and the three of them do their best to make her look as normal as they can.

They don't succeed. She steps from the bathroom in her pink dress and blonde wig and she looks nothing like any normal girl Mike has ever seen. She's different. Mike can't figure out what's wrong with himself because he just can't stop staring, and then a word comes out of his mouth before he realizes he's going to say it.

"Pretty."

Because that's what she is. She's pretty, she looks so pretty, and Mike doesn't even care about the look Lucas is giving him when El offers up a small smile back. Then he cares very, very much, and tries to save face.

"...good. Pretty good."

It doesn't work. But El goes to the mirror, looking over her reflection and murmuring the word quietly to herself, and she looks genuinely happy for possibly the first time, so Mike doesn't regret saying it.

Mike knows that the best way to keep his friends' teasing at a minimum is to stop looking at El, quit staring at El, no, *no, look anywhere but El*, but he can't help it. They make it all the way to the AV Club room before being caught by Mr. Clarke, and Mike feels a little bit badly about lying to him, especially after Will's name is mentioned and he gives him that same strange sort of smile that all adults have been giving them since Will went missing. With a promise to be able to use the ham radio later, the four of them are forced into the gym for an assembly.

Mike doesn't want to be here. He doesn't want to be at a pseudo-memorial service for someone who isn't dead, surrounded by people who only now are pretending to care. Though not everyone is pretending. Troy and James are being loud and rude and laughing, and while Will may not be dead he's still lost and alone and in danger, and anger swells up in Mike again.

He doesn't really realize the weight of his actions until Troy is on the gym floor and the whole school is watching. But it's good that they are, because when Troy pulls back to deck him in the face he's frozen instead, and pees his pants in front of the entire student body. There's some laughter and chatter and Mike is amazed, turning around in time to see El catch his eye, smile the smallest bit, and wipe a tiny amount of blood from her nose, heading towards the gym exit. The word "stunned" doesn't even begin to cover how Mike feels, simply following after her.

They make contact with Will, and it's terrifying. Lights flash and they hear him crying out to his mom, but he doesn't hear any of their attempts to reach him. El's eyes close and black and white starts closing in on Mike and he feels panicked, worried about her, reaching in her direction when the radio bursts into flame and everything stops.

He asks El if she's okay, but she's obviously not. She needs to get home, and with the help of Lucas and Dustin they remove her from the AV room as the sprinklers rain down on them and the fire alarm blares. Eleven can barely walk, her face pale, her eyelids fluttering, and Mike is so afraid for her, unable to properly breathe until they get her back in the basement and lay her out on the couch. Dustin suggests that she needs fuel, offering her some of his trail mix despite Lucas's protests that she's not a robot. But she eats all of the trail mix, even the raisins, and nods when Mike asks her if she feels better. Then it's time for some research.

Mike doesn't understand the point of dressing up in a fancy way for a funeral. When he asks, his mom doesn't really answer, saying that funerals are about being respectful and celebrating Will's memory. Mike knows that. But all of the memories he has with Will are happy ones, running through the woods and playing games and sharing secrets and eating junk food until they both have stomach aches. In

not a single one of these memories is Will in fancy clothes, but his mother is distraught, so he decides not to argue. The funeral has Dustin completely unbothered, but the sight of the casket does get to Mike a little bit, with the grey rain and the grey sadness all around them, and he finds himself wishing Eleven was here with him. He would ask to hold her hand, trying to imagine the colors of the flowers around them at their full vibrancy to help him feel better. It works a little bit.

During the food and drinks, they find Mr. Clarke at a table and ask about dimensions. His answer is helpful, helpful enough to know they're looking for a gate, and he excuses himself to go talk to Will's mom. Lucas says he wants another cookie, getting on his feet, putting on his sad-about-Will face and walking back into the crowd of people. Lucas is best at doing the sad face, so good that sometimes Mike had to wonder if he's actually pretending or not. Dustin turns to him. He looks excited.

"This is crazy, Mike. Your girl can communicate across dimensions. Dimensions!"

"My girl?" Mike splutters, knowing his face is heating up and trying to frown the feeling away. They're not really supposed to talk about her outside of the basement, but Mike can't just let the statement stand. "Why is Eleven my girl?"

"She lives your house, for one." Dustin points out, and Mike can't really dispute that fact. "You're the one that named her--"

"She already had a name, I didn't--"

"--and you can understand her, somehow. She says like two words at a time, and you guys have full conversations. It's like your brains are linked, or something weird." He regards Mike for a moment. "Do you think she can use her powers to read your mind?"

The thought is a scary one, not to mention extremely embarrassing. He hopes not. Considering El's powers though, he doesn't think so.

"Probably not."

"Either way, I wouldn't want to play charades against you guys." Dustin says. "Lucas and I wouldn't stand a chance."

Mike tries to imagine that, playing charades with El. Playing any games with El, really. Eleven being their friend, attending their school with them and going out to the arcade or the theater. The thought of going to see a movie with El heats his face up again, but he likes the idea, too.

"She's our Mage." Dustin says.

"What do you mean?"

"She's our Mage." He repeats. "She's the Mage, You're the Paladin, Lucas is the Ranger, and I'm the Bard. And we're on a campaign to find our Cleric and bring him back from the Realm of Shadows."

The simplification of the problem does help a little. Mike frowns.

"But we're up against a demogorgon. We'll need to roll a lot of twenties."

Dustin shrugs.

"Sure. But with real magic on our side, I feel alright about it."

What none of them expect is for a member of the Party to betray them. Mike doesn't believe it. He doesn't want to believe it. He should have noticed it though, he thinks, because El has been looking gradually weaker throughout the day, walking slower, her hand going up to her nose. He'd been trying not to watch her though, as part of his ongoing effort not to stare. But she'd misdirected their compasses and led them in a circle. Mike is angry and hurt, but he remembers back to the night Will's body was found, trying to push those feelings down, knowing now that there must be an explanation and that they just need to find one. All she can say is that it isn't safe, looking at him pleadingly. She's afraid for them, and doesn't want them to go to the gate. But they have to.

Lucas doesn't accept her answer, too frustrated and frightened to be patient and he's rough with her instead, and when he calls Eleven a monster and Mike sees the stricken look on her face, he can't hold it

together anymore. She doesn't deserve to be attacked for trying to protect them. He tackles Lucas to the ground, but Lucas is stronger than him and soon wrestles his back onto the grass. Both Eleven and Dustin are yelling at them to stop fighting, then a scream splits the air. All colors blink before Mike's eyes and Lucas isn't on him anymore, thrown into the air and skidded across the ground and slammed into a slab of concrete. His body is limp and still and panic swells in Mike's throat, running to him, he and Dustin trying to shake him awake to no avail.

"Why would you do that?" He shouts, whirling on El. She's crying, fear on her face and blood coming from her nose, the color deep and as scary as she is. "What's wrong with you?"

She just opens her mouth, no sound coming out, looking almost as though she can't breathe. Mike turns back to his friend in need, trying to wake him up, letting out a breath of relief when he opens his eyes.

Lucas is disoriented, tears pricking his eyes as he struggles into a sitting position. He bats both Mike and Dustin off of him, getting up and striding away. Mike doesn't want to let him go, still worried for him, but Dustin holds him back. And that's when he remembers he yelled at El again, feeling sick to his stomach when he looks around and notices that not only are colors more grey than normal, but they're fading fast.

"Where's El?" He asks Dustin, who looks around too. The junkyard is empty save for the two of them, without even footprints to suggest where she had went. She's just gone. They yell for her, searching until they have to go home, but Mike's vision stays frustratingly grey-washed. He sleeps in the basement that night, lying on the couch with his eyes on the door, but she doesn't come home like last time. Dustin comes over early the next morning to find Mike pacing in front of her alcove.

"I just... I can't believe she didn't come back."

"She's got to be close." Dustin rationalizes. Mike nods a little. The colors are a bit brighter than they'd been before he met El, which means she's in town, and closer than she used to be. But he feels

guilty and terrible, absolutely horrible for yelling at her the way he had, her horrified expression etched into his mind.

“Mike, this isn’t your fault.” Dustin argues, as though reading his mind. Mike realizes he’s right.

“Yeah. It’s Lucas’s.”

“Wasn’t his fault either.”

Mike turns to him, wondering if his friend is joking.

“It wasn’t his fault?”

“No!”

Mike can’t believe what he’s hearing.

“So you’re saying he wasn’t way out of line?”

“Totally, but so were you!”

“What--”

“And so was Eleven!”

No. Dustin was not dragging her into this too.

“Oh, give me a break.”

Dustin purses his lips, taking a step forwards, his voice raised. He looks a little angry, but mostly exasperated at him for reasons Mike doesn’t understand.

“No Mike, you give me a break!” He exclaims. “All three of you were being a bunch of little assholes. I was the only reasonable one. But the bottom line is, you pushed first. And you know the rules: draw first blood--”

“No!”

As soon as Dustin says it though, Mike knows he’s right. He drew first blood, so he has to apologize. But he doesn’t want to. He’s not sorry.

He's mad at Lucas for calling El a traitor and a stray dog and a monster, he's scared for El because he's supposed to keep her safe but she's still missing, and he's mad at himself. He's a little mad at Dustin too, for being so reasonable. But the rule is law, and Mike loves his friends too much to let himself be banished, so he agrees with Dustin's plan to talk to Lucas and find Eleven. They're outside, backpacks on and about to mount their bikes when Dustin fixes him with a look.

"What?" Mike has to ask.

"Why do you care about her so much?" Dustin asks. The question would have sounded rude, but with the way Dustin asks it, it doesn't. He's genuinely curious. "We've known her for like... A week, maybe. She's cool and stuff, super cool, but even before we found out that she has magic powers you've just... I don't know. Been like this."

Mike looks down at his hands, his fingers curled around the handles of his bike. He swallows.

"She..." It's not really embarrassing now, admitting it. He looks back up, meeting his friend's eyes. "She's my soulmate, Dustin. You know, colors and stuff."

It obviously isn't the answer he's expecting and he stands there for a moment, his mouth slightly open. Then he blinks once. Twice.

"Oh."

"Yeah."

Dustin slings his leg over his bike, his face set with determination.

"Let's find her then."

Mike asks Dustin not to tell Lucas though, especially if he's still angry. And he is still angry, and it makes Mike angry too. While Dustin tries to be a moderator, Lucas still doesn't accept his apology, shoving them aside and going upstairs, so they look for Eleven instead.

At Dustin's suggestion, they try to use the color vision as an actual

“hot and cold” gauge, like they’d been told about in elementary school, but it’s really difficult. Mike has a newfound appreciation for how Eleven had managed to find her way home before, in the dark even, because he can barely tell when colors change to be brighter or dimmer. A busted up shopping center has Eleven’s handiwork all over it, and that helps their search a little, but in the end, it’s her that finds them.

Troy and James find them first. The bullies chase them to the quarry, and Troy has a knife and he’s so, so angry. He holds the blade to Dustin, threatening to use it unless Mike jumps, and despite Dustin begging him not to, Mike knows he doesn’t have a choice. There are rocks below, the water dark and dangerous, and he steps off the edge and towards the abyss.

He’s only falling for a few seconds before the air seems to catch him. Colors are coming back, steady and sure, and he’s lifted over the heads of everyone, placed back down on the ground. He turns and there Eleven is, her wig gone and her skin streaked with dirt, stalking forwards with a near-deadly expression on her face. She dispatches the bullies easily and they run, Dustin yelling after them, but Mike barely notices; he can’t even describe how relieved he is to see her, happy and thankful and shocked all at once.

He’s looking at her, but she’s not looking back. Her eyes are downcast, and she blinks a few times, swaying on her feet. Mike realizes what’s about to happen a second before it does; saving him had weakened her, and she falls to the ground. They run to her, but by the time they reach her she’s flat on her back, and there are tears in her eyes.

“Mike.” Her voice sounds almost broken, and Mike’s chest aches. “I’m sorry.”

“Sorry? What are you sorry for?”

“The gate. I opened it.” There’s blood coming from not only her nose, but her ears too. Up this close, it doesn’t look scary, or dangerous; it’s a show of weakness, a sign that she needs help. She made herself bleed to save him. “I’m the monster.”

“No. No, El. You’re not the monster. You saved me.”

She searches his eyes at those words, her face screwing up again as a new wave of pain goes over her face, her eyes welling up and threatening to spill over. He places his hand on her arm. He needs her to understand that she isn’t bad.

“Do you understand? You saved me.”

He pulls her up from the ground and into his arms, pressing her head into his shoulder, holding her tight. Despite all previous misgivings about being touched, Eleven doesn’t pull away. She holds him just as tightly, and though they’re crouched uncomfortably on the ground, Mike doesn’t ever want to let her go. It feels right to have her in his arms, like he’s found where he’s supposed to be in the universe. Right here, right next to her, wherever she may be.

Dustin joins in, his arms around the both of them, and Mike feels Eleven swallow roughly, wiping her cheek on his shoulder and nestling closer.

It’s also Dustin that moves them back into action. Eleven needs to be cleaned up, and she needs food. They walk back to Mike’s house slowly, coming in through the basement. Dustin keeps staring at them, making a face at Mike and smiling, and Mike has to resist the incredibly strong urge to tell him to shut up. They go into the bathroom to wash the dirt off her face, and while Mike knows Eleven doesn’t need the help, he doesn’t really want to let her out of his sight just yet. He’s as gentle as he can be with the washcloth, and her eyes never leave his face.

“That’s better.” He says when she’s clean, letting his arms fall to his sides. Both the makeup and the wig are gone, but she’s just as pretty as she was before, if not moreso. She turns to the mirror though, obviously missing them, her expression sad as she puts a hand to her short hair.

“You don’t need it.” He tells her earnestly, and she spares a glance at him.

“Still pretty?”

“Yeah, pretty.” He says, willing himself not to blush. “Really pretty.”

She looks back to the mirror, and thankfully, she smiles.

“El?”

“Yes?”

She’s looking at him now, with her big brown eyes, and he finds himself wondering if there’s a word prettier than pretty, because pretty doesn’t do her justice anymore.

“I’m happy you’re home.” He confesses.

“Me too.” She says, and she smiles again. When he meets her eyes he realizes that he wants to kiss her, but to his surprise, it’s her that steps closer. Nerves are welling in Mike’s stomach the closer she gets, not much space between them at all when the bathroom door bursts open. They both jump, El turning to the source of the noise. It’s Dustin, exclaiming that Lucas might be in trouble.

He is. The bad men are coming, and Mike knows that they’re coming for Eleven, telling his mom to say he’s left the country, because he’s willing to bike all the way to Canada to keep Eleven safe. The bad men follow them in an army of big white vans, but they still manage to meet up with Lucas. Then a van turns up the street, coming right at them, and being so surrounded makes it feel like they’re out of options.

Mike doesn’t even have time to slow his bike down. He feels El’s grip tighten on his waist, his color vision flashing to black and white for just a second, the same as it did when El threw Lucas into the air. This time, she flips an entire van.

Time seems to stop as the giant vehicle soars over their heads. Even Dustin, who had been yelling near nonstop, falls silent as they watch it go, Mike’s legs completely ceasing to work. The van lands with a deafening crash behind them, and they all look around at each other. Then El’s grip loosens, her arms weak around him, her head dropping onto his shoulder.

“El?” He asks quietly. She makes a small sound so he knows she’s still

conscious, and they carry on. The four of them make it back to the junkyard, dismounting their bikes. Mike is worried for Eleven, realizing how exhausted she must be from saving him twice in a row. Dustin is yelling again, completely in awe, Lucas's voice cutting him off. He kneels down next to Eleven, apologizing and placing a hand on her back.

"Friends... Friends don't lie." She says quietly. "I'm sorry too."

Then Mike holds his hand out for a handshake, and Lucas accepts it.

They try to formulate a plan. Lucas tells them about Hawkins Lab, insisting that the gate has to be in there somewhere. But there's no way to get in, what with the barbed wire fencing surrounding the place and the armed guards everywhere. They don't really get any farther than wondering that on earth it is they're supposed to do when a helicopter starts heading their way. The bad men are still after them. Scrambling in a panic, they stash their bikes under a rundown bus and dive inside, the helicopter passing overhead. They're all fugitives now.

They fill Lucas in on what they had done. He offers Eleven a high five when he hears about her defeat of the bullies, but she has no idea what the gesture means, so they have to teach it to her. But they don't come any closer to an idea on rescuing Will, and Mike has a hard time even seeing any viable options.

When the Chief and Nancy reach out to them, Mike decides to trust them. He doesn't really know if the decision is good or bad, but as soon as Dustin starts pacing and fretting about Lando Calrissian, he begins to regret it, because now he has a weird fear in his stomach that someone is going to make it out of this with only one hand left. Though if this situation is really like Lando then he should be more worried about cryogenics, and now he has to shake his head to clear it.

Thankfully though, Chief Hopper comes for them. He takes them to Will's house, where Nancy, Jonathan, and Will's mom are all there. They have to explain everything, and in the process they find out that not only does Eleven know what the gate is, but she's seen it. She's been inside the lab. El tries to contact Will, as well as Nancy's friend

Barbara, but she can't, and Mike knows why. She's exhausted. When she returns from the bathroom though, she says she can find them in the bath.

They build a sensory deprivation tank in the middle school gym, and it's arguably the strangest thing he's ever done. Nancy asks him if he likes Eleven and he completely lies his ass off, but he can't admit it to her. Besides, he's pretty sure she's lying to him about how she feels about Jonathan, so they're even anyway.

When Eleven lies in the water and falls still, the lights flicker, spark, and Mike's world plunges into black and white again. It's like all those times it happened in middle school, the exact same feeling, that flatlining that had happened before. Except El isn't dead, she isn't dying, and it feels wrong for colors to be gone when he's so close to her. He wants to touch her, to reach out and grab her hand, but he knows he can't. He hates this, worry and fear all tangled up inside his chest, his breathing going shallow. They find out that Barbara is dead, and Will is in Castle Byers, but his voice is faint. Eleven begins to whimper, her voice coming out as desperate cries through the supercom, and Mike very nearly jumps in the bath to help her before El pulls herself out of whatever trance, or void she'd entered. She yanks the goggles off her face, her breathing heavy and her face already screwed up in tears, blood running from her nose as she holds tight to Mrs. Byers's arm and cries.

It's Lucas who breaks the shock and stillness that's fallen over all of them. He runs off and finds a towel for Eleven and they pull her from the water, sitting her down on the bleachers. She's nearly too weak to hold herself up, but Mike is more than willing to offer up his shoulder and she rests against him, getting his clothes wet, but he doesn't care. Lucas wraps the towel around her shoulders, and Dustin pats her sympathetically on the knee.

"Hey, El?" Mike asks softly. Not only does El angle her face up to look at him, but Dustin and Lucas look over as well. The question isn't going to be private, but Mike doesn't really care. He's too curious.

"Mike?" She prompts.

"When... When you're all in the upside down, or whatever... Is it black and white down there?"

"Yes." She says. "No colors. I don't like it."

Mike nods a little.

"When you do that, I can't see colors either." He confesses. "It always scares me."

"But colors are here." She says. Her voice is gentle, and he almost laughs; she's weak and wet and shaken, and sounds like trying to comfort him. "Colors are with you, Mike."

"Yeah." He swallows, nodding. "They are with you."

Eleven replaces her head on his shoulder, scooting a little closer. Out the corner of his eye, Mike sees Dustin grinning ear to ear.

"Wait, what?" Lucas asks. His voice is loud. "Eleven, she's... She's your... Your..."

"Yeah." Mike says, before he can get the word out. Lucas gapes at him.

"No wonder you look at her like a lovesick puppy all the time! You are one!"

Mike can feel himself blushing.

"Shut up Lucas."

"Mike and Eleven, sitting in a tree, k-i-s--"

"Shut up!" Mike exclaims again, because Nancy and Jonathan are walking up. Jonathan gives Eleven his jacket and the two say that they have something to do. Then they're gone, and it's just the four of them at the middle school, alone. Dustin goes out in the search of chocolate pudding, Lucas following after him.

"We should go." Mike tells El. "We probably shouldn't split up. Besides, you can eat whatever Dustin finds."

Eleven nods, musters up her strength, and gets to her feet. Her first step is wobbly and Mike reaches out to steady her, his heart pounding when she takes his hand. Dustin yells when he finds the chocolate pudding, and Mike leads Eleven down to a cafeteria table.

“Are you feeling any better?” Mike asks her. She gives a little half shrug, then fixes him a more curious look.

“What’s ‘putting’?”

Mike chuckles a little, a small, warm feeling in his chest at the question.

“Pudding, it’s... It’s this chocolate goo you eat with a spoon.”

Eleven makes a face, Mike realizing how gross the description was. He tries to reassure her that when this is all over, she won’t be reduced to eating junk food all the time. She’ll eat real food, and sleep in a real bed. His parents could take care of her. She’ll be able to come home like she’s supposed to, because Will will be back and they won’t be fugitives and she won’t be a secret anymore. She smiles when he tells her all this, about her having a proper family, with his mom as a mom and Nancy as a sister.

“Will you be like my brother?” She asks, and Mike can’t shake the idea away fast enough.

“What? No, no.”

Eleven doesn’t understand, and he gets himself tongue tied trying to explain.

“I was thinking... I don’t know... Maybe we can go to the Snow Ball together.”

“Snow Ball?” She asks back. He tells her about the cheesy school dance, and that you definitely aren’t supposed to go with your sister. You’re supposed to go with someone you like, and he likes her so, so much.

“A friend?”

“Not a friend.” She doesn’t understand, looking a little put out with how much he’s contradicting her. “Someone like a...”

He doesn’t know how to put his thoughts into words, the sense of belonging he has when he’s with her, the happy feeling that spreads through his whole body when her eyes meet his own. So instead he moves forward, across the cafeteria bench, and presses a kiss to her lips.

He’s got a whole garden’s worth of butterflies in his stomach when their lips touch, and he pulls back quickly, nervous for her reaction. She’s surprised, but she meets his eyes again and seems to understand what he was trying to say, a little smile growing on her face.

“Like... A soulmate.” He manages out. The sound of a car driving up reaches them and Mike assumes it’s Nancy, but when he goes to check, it definitely, definitely isn’t. It’s the bad men, and they have to run. Mike takes Eleven’s hand without hesitation and she holds it so tightly that he can feel how afraid she is, running through the dark school halls. They’re cornered, and just as Eleven said before the bad people are all holding guns, and all of their guns are pointed at them. Fear closes around Mike’s throat, Eleven gripping his hand even tighter, staring down the blonde woman in front of them. Colors flicker and begin to fade, and as they watch, blood begins to run from the bad peoples’ eyes. They drop to the floor all around them, dead, El’s hand ripped from his own as she falls too, her eyes closed, her body completely limp. Mike’s stomach twists and he drops to his knees next to her, because she isn’t moving, she isn’t waking up, and all the colors around them are going grey. She needs help.

“Leave her.”

The male voice is commanding, an older man stepping down the hallway towards them, completely disregarding the mass of dead bodies as he walks. Mike tries to defend Eleven, to tell him to back off, Lucas shouting for them all to eat shit, but guards jump them from behind, and Mike can only watch as the man sits Eleven up. He promises to take her home. Eleven knows who the man is, but she whimpers when he touches her, cradling her head in his hands. Mike thrashes, every fiber of his being fighting to be there, to help her, but the guard holding him is too strong.

“Bad.” Eleven’s voice is broken and weak, the word causing the old man to freeze. “Bad.” She begins to struggle weakly against him, looking over, meeting Mike’s eyes, looking exhausted and helpless. “Mike, Mike.”

Then the lights begin to flicker, and the demogorgon is here.

The guards all drop their grip as the creature bursts through the wall, pulling out their guns and firing and they spare no time, scooping Eleven off the ground and running. They make it to a science classroom in the back of the building, setting her down on a table. Eleven grabs for Mike’s hands and holds them tight, so tightly it almost hurts, despite how weak the rest of her is. Fear is coursing through Mike’s entire body so strongly that he feels sick, tears stinging his eyes. He needs to keep her safe. He has to. He can’t lose her.

“Just hold on a little longer, okay? He’s gone. The bad man’s gone.” He tries to promise her the future, trying to smile, and she smiles back just a little. Color returns to the room, grey around the edges but bright when he looks at her. “We can go to the Snow Ball.”

“Promise?” She asks. Her whole body is shaking.

“Promise.”

The demogorgon bursts down the door, everyone yelling as Lucas fires at the monster with the wrist rocket. It’s all flesh and teeth and death, advancing on them, and some part of Mike already knows that they can’t use rocks to stop it. It’s too big. It’s too strong. It’s going to get them.

Then it’s slammed into the chalkboard, screeching as it’s held down to the wall, and Eleven is on her feet, blood flowing from her nose as she advances towards the creature. She’s trying to save them, but she’s too weak; Mike can’t let her do something like this. He rushes forwards desperately but she flings him away and he lands hard on the floor, his back against the cabinets.

She reaches the monster before turning back to them, and there’s a sick dread heavy in Mike’s chest, because he can feel that no matter

what, this won't end well. He feels tears on his cheeks as she meets his eyes, colors fading around the both of them as El's power drains her.

“Goodbye, Mike.”

The last thing Mike sees is her face, her scream echoing in his ears. Then his world snaps completely to black and white, and he's left alone.